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ABSTRACT

An approach to teaching introductory psychology is presented, stressing depth over coverage and giving power and authority to students rather than to the teacher and the textbook. The typical introductory class is dedicated to the notion of coverage, and textbooks and tests are material artifacts supporting the ideal of coverage. Also in most introductory courses, students assume an acquiescent and non-authoritative status vis-a-vis the authority of the text and the teacher. The proposed approach involves studying in depth one "eminent contributor" to the field of psychology. For 8 weeks of the course, students write short reports on several contributors, recommend papers for other students to read, and write position papers explaining the pros and cons of studying the various contributors. Following "campaigning" and a series of votes, the class chooses one contributor to concentrate on. Students then conduct an inquiry into that individual, reading works by and about him/her, and writing papers. Course grades are based on the students' degree of participation in the project and their peers' perceived value of each student's participation. Limitations of the technique are noted, and six references are cited. (JDD)

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Collaborative Knowledge-making in an Introductory Psychology Course: "Coverage," Depth, and Authority

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Collaborative Knowledge-making in an Introductory Psychology Course:

"Coverage," Depth, and Authority

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In this paper I will describe a novel approach to teaching introductory psychology, one that stresses depth over coverage, and that gives power and authority to students rather than centering them in the teacher and textbook. Before describing what happens in my introductory (freshman) psychology class, however, it is necessary to portray the typical class. The reason is that my course is an extended critique of the typical class.

"Coverage"

The typical introductory class is dedicated to the notion of coverage. Coverage means that one tries at least to mention every important concept in every area of psychology. In introductory psychology this means in practice that you spend a day or so on the history of psychology, a week on methods, a week on the parts of the neuron and the brain, two weeks on learning, and so on, until the end of the year, when there is a week or two left for social psychology. The rationale is that in an introductory course, a course that introduces, students should be "exposed" to all major areas and concepts (the metaphor of exposure suggests that students are so much photographic film), and that this exposure is good for if not essential for students.

Textbooks and tests are among the material artifacts that support the ideal of coverage. As Michael Apple argues, the textbook is a key player. (In literature classes anthologies may have a similar function.) Textbooks are encyclopedias that claim to represent everything worth knowing about the discipline: Introductory psychology textbooks, for example, tend to have three

or four pages on history, half a chapter on methods, a chapter on the parts of the neuron and the brain, a couple of chapters on learning . . . the pattern is clear: What happens in the classroom is a direct reflection of the textbook. It's the text, not the teacher, who controls which topics are considered, in what depth, and even in what order.

The testing system is the second material artifact that supports the ideal of coverage. Evaluation in introductory psychology is almost universally accomplished by multiple-choice tests. Multiple-choice tests have the advantage that they're seemingly objective, widely accepted, and because they're easy to generate and to score they leave most of one's time free for the really important business of academe, research, which leads to tenure and promotion. It's very easy to generate a multiple-choice test since the publishing companies take responsibility for writing the items. The tests are keyed to the text. Apparently some publishing companies offer a service whereby you can order a test by phone and they will Fax it to you the next day; they'll mark it, too, thus adding new meaning to the concept of "teacher-proof" materials. To say that evaluation is an important element of the coverage course would be an understatement: I have seen classrooms and courses where it's the <u>only</u> element. The testing occurs at computer stations, and it is, needless to say, multiple-choice.

There are some problems with coverage, however. As Fred Newmann points out, (1) coverage fosters the delusion that humans can master everything worth knowing; (2) coverage reinforces habits of mindlessness -- it stifles questioning and curiosity; and (3) coverage is mostly a waste of time because students don't remember all that information they've memorized just for the exam. To Newmann's list I would add that "coverage" is the wrong term. It can't be done. You simply can't cover social psychology in two weeks if "cover" means cover like the snow in New Brunswick covers the ground. At best you can

mention some key principles and findings, but that's hardly "coverage." I won't say that the emperor of psychology has no clothes -- he has bits of material here and there and they're strategically placed -- but he is far from "covered."

Authority

The second feature of the typical introductory psychology class that needs to be examined is the question of authority. In the world of teachers, texts, and students, where is authority located? Not in the students, certainly. Teachers interpret the text to their students; teachers mediate between text and students. Carmen Luke, Suzanne de Castell, and Allan Luke point out that "the student assumes an acquiescent and *non-authoritative status*" vis-à-vis the authority of the text and the teacher, who themselves are "beyond criticism" (252). In general students are required to be nonauthoritative consumers of textual knowledge. The teacher is the arbiter of what is important in the text -- that is, what will be on the exam. The identities of text and teacher merge.

A relevant distinction here is one Bruno Latour makes between "completed science" and "science-in-the-making." In the typical course students are required to memorize facts of completed psychology, but they are not invited into the world of psychology-in-the making where authority is granted to individuals who advance knowledge claims that others find interesting and citable.

In short, the name of the game in the typical class is cover the material; authority is vested in the text-teacher. But what's the alternative? I suggest that psychology classes can be based on the idea of depth, not coverage; and that rather than authority being vested in the text-teacher, students themselves can to a great extent become authorities, and, not incidentally, authors. A description of my introductory class will help make this clear.

Courses as Scholarly Research Projects

Let me first define my course negatively by saying what there is not. There are no essays (at least not in the traditional sense), no textbook, no lectures, and no exams. Now, to put things more positively, what does happen is that the course is organized as a scholarly research project. This means that the students are responsible for finding out about some topic and reporting their findings to one another. Sometimes the students work individually; most of the time they work in small teams or task forces that are responsible for doing the research necessary to answer some question. Then they report their results to the class as a whole. Generally this is handled by means of written reports which are photocopied and distributed to everyone. Out of these reports new questions and problems emerge, new research teams are formed, and the cycle is repeated.

To be even more specific, here is what has happened in my introductory psychology course this year. In Canada we call this a "full course" -- it meets 3 hours a week for 26 weeks. The course started in September, 1989 with 28 students and will finish in April, 1990 with 24. The purpose of the course is to study in depth one "eminent contributor" to psychology. At the beginning of the year I provided a list of psychologists I considered eminent. In a concession to coverage, I deliberately included women and men from different areas of psychology: Mary Ainsworth and Sandra Scarr (developmental), Stanley Milgram (social), Harry Harlow (comparative), Sigmund Freud (personality), and then because I thought that physiological psychology tends to get short-changed, at least at the liberal arts university where I teach, I picked three psychologists who had made contributions in the area of brain and behavior: Donald Hebb, Ronald Melzack, and Roger Sperry. The first eight weeks of the course were centered around this question: Of these eight, which one should we pick to study for the rest of the year? The students wrote short reports on the

contributors, compiled bibliographies, and read articles that they had found. They recommended a particular article or excerpt that everyone else then read. They wrote position papers explaining the pros and cons of studying the various contributors.

"Inkshedding"

The discussion as to which contributor to choose was carried out entirely in writing. Students would write about which one they preferred, and why, and then these writings would circulate around the class. As they read these comments, others students would mark passages that they found especially interesting or striking, and then I would type up the marked passages, photocopy them, and distribute them in class the next day. My colleague at St. Thomas University, James Reither, has named this cycle of writing, reading, marking, publishing, and reading, "inkshedding."

So, during this part of the course students read and wrote about a variety of topics, from Sperry's work on split brains to Ainsworth's work on attachment to Milgram's experiments on destructive obedience. There was a series of votes and "campaigning" which again took place entirely through writing. In the end the issue came down to whether or not it would be a good idea to concentrate on Freud, clearly the "odd man out." The abundance of library resources on Freud was seen as an advantage by some, whereas others thought it would be a disadvantage (maybe there's too much material out there). But in the final ballot Freud was an easy winner over Sandra Scarr.

Freud in Depth

Since November, then, the class has been conducting an inquiry into Freud. The students read and responded in writing to his first seven "general introduction to psychoanalysis" lectures; each student read a different book about Freud and wrote an essay/review of it; they read and responded to Bruno

Bettelheim's New Yorker article on "Freud and the Soul"; in pairs, they wrote short reports on topics such as the Oedipus complex, free association, hysteria; these reports led to further work in areas such as psychosexual development, the Freud-Jung correspondence, and Freud's cultural works. This set of reports is currently being revised to form chapters of a so-called Course Book which will be published (photocopied) around the middle of April. And since Christmas we have been watching a docudrama featuring David Suchet as young and old Freud, which has been helpful in understanding Freud biographically. By the end of the course we will have spent eighteen weeks exclusively on Freud.

Evaluation and Grades

At this point readers may be wondering, "If you don't have essays or exams, how do you determine grades?" It is possible. I noted earlier that multiple-choice exams are an integral part of the coverage-based introductory psychology course. In general, I think the evaluation system is a fundamental, perhaps the fundamental aspect of a course -- it drives the rest of it. (Certainly students often look at it that way.) In any case, not having essays or exams, I base grades on quantitative and qualitative criteria. The course is organized as a research project, so the quantitative criterion refers to the students' degree of participation in the project, and the qualitative criterion refers to their perceived value of participation. In other words, the quantitative component measures sheer persistence: attendance, doing all the various reports, and getting them in on time. (That is, I don't grade the reports, nor do I even read them all, but I do keep track of whether or not they're done.) The students also get a qualitative score based on the perceived value of their contribution. To determine this I rely heavily on confidential narrative peer evaluations that are conducted at the end of the year. The people who are in the best position to know who has contributed what are the students themselves, and therefore I ask them to comment on what they have learned from every other

student in the class. The system isn't perfect by any means, but the central point is that the students' grades are determined not by "how much they know" as measured by an exam, but rather by how much and with what effect they have contributed to the class project.

A Few Qualms

In spite of the generally glowing account I've just given, I'd be less than candid if I didn't admit to some misgivings and ambivalence. I try to distribute authority around the room, as it were, instead of concentrating it in a textbook or in me. But I worry that no matter what I do I am still seen and in fact am the ultimate authority. After all, I'm still the one who ultimately decides the grade, and it's hard to underestimate the power of the A. It's clear where power and authority are located in the typical introductory course; I need to think more about where they are located in my atypical course. If power isn't so obviously located in the teacher-text, has it gone underground -- as a Freudian might say, has it merely disguised itself, only to find expression in other, more devious forms?

I worry, too, that in my eagerness to replace coverage with depth I haven't gone too far. How much responsibility do I have to my discipline to do what it expects me to do in an introductory course -- cover the material? Am I doing a disservice to my students by not ensuring that they have been "exposed" to all the concepts that my colleagues in psychology expect them to be exposed to? (I might add that I don't get complaints from my colleagues or from students who end up in their classes, but maybe they're just polite. When I describe what I do to other psychologists I do get a fair number of blank looks.) Certainly I could and perhaps should work out a more balanced compromise between depth and coverage.

On the other hand, rather than accommodating myself to the discipline of psychology, psychology could, if it became convinced, accommodate itself to the perspective described here (and elsewhere: see Reither; Reither and Vipond). What will it take to convince psychologists and other academics that classrooms can be places -- workshops -- where collaborative knowledge-making can occur? Someday I hope to be able to answer that question. Meanwhile, I do know that treating classrooms as workshops instead of lecture theaters changes the way you think about what you know and who you are.

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